

Presidents as Perfect Detonators:

The Deterrent Threat of Omnicide

Someday, if we survive the 1960's, the era might arrive that the proponents of the Balance of Terror celebrate prematurely: the world in which the best-planned and executed nuclear ~~surprise~~ attack would be, literally, suicidal.

Deliberately to choose to attack would, in that world, be insane. For that reason, there is a widely-held belief that blackmail would vanish along with total war. The same should apply, if at all, in a world where people think that nuclear war must be suicidal; and for some (NATO) it is. Arthur Lee Burns, in an analytical article in World Politics, expressed this two years ago in a very suggestive metaphor. "By transforming major war into mutual mass-destruction," he said, the new weapons "rule out that threat of it against which, as bank-deposit, all the paper of historic diplomacy has been issued."¹

As we are aware, a good deal of paper threatening mutual destruction is still being passed, not only through tellers' windows. Contrary to Burns' hypothesis that "the hydrogen bomb," by preventing diplomats from drawing on the threat of war, "has abolished the balance of power," in fact "historic diplomacy" has not come to an end or entirely changed its character. How is it that threats continue to be made by national representatives who are willing to declare that they believe that to carry out their threats would be suicidal? Actually, in terms of a reasonable theory of threat-behavior, there is nothing at all paradoxical about this. To threaten, conditionally, to attack is not to choose attack. Even to commit oneself to carrying out the threat is not

morally?

¹World Politics, July, 1957, Vol. IX, No. 4, From Balance to Deterrence, p. 504 (my ital)

to choose war, or suicide: at most, it is to choose a risk of those events. And that risk might seem "small enough" in comparison to the gains to be enjoyed from a successful threat. Still, to the extent that it still represents threat-behavior, we would expect it to take on new patterns, reflecting the nature of the new threats being used and confronted.

No doubt, a reasonable threatener would have to be very sure, before committing himself, that his blackmail (or "deterrence") would succeed; he could accept at most a small risk that he would be called upon to carry out his threat. On the other hand, where the threatened action entails a strong possibility of nuclear war, the victim would resist only if he were very sure that the threatener will not carry out his threat. Under these circumstances, the threatener might not feel called upon to commit himself at all. He might bluff: make the threat, go through various maneuvers designed to make his opponent uncertain of his behavior, and let his opponent weigh the risks. Indeed, under a true Balance of Terror regime, he might feel free to be particularly provocative. Since the advantage to striking first would, by assumption, have disappeared, he needn't worry that the opponent would have a rational incentive to launch a pre-emptive attack, no matter how likely his threats made an eventual conflict appear.

Still, to bluff is to forego the maximum degree of credibility: hence, to accept a lower chance of success (along with lower risks). The threatener might decide that if he does go through the extra steps that serve to bind him irrevocably to carrying out his threat, the threat will then be "almost certain" to succeed; in other words, the opponent would be "almost certain" to regard the risk of resisting as "too great." He might, then, proceed to commit himself to carrying out his threat of mutual suicide.

Clearly, the situation is one we discussed in the last lecture, in which the willingness to risk conflict is very low for each party; neither is willing to take an action that significantly raises the risk of conflict, either in resisting or in committing himself to threats. As we saw then, in situations where a "normal" blackmailer may have difficulty in making his threats sufficiently credible, "madness" of two distinct sorts may pay off. If it is only necessary to create in the victim's mind a little uncertainty, a new possibility that the threat might be carried out, then "madness" in the form of non-rationality, unpredictability, erratic or impulsive or non-directed behavior, may do the trick.

On the other hand, it may be desirable to make the victim "sure" that the threat will be carried out: either because the demand is unusually high, or because the blackmailer wants to be very sure the victim will comply. In this case, it won't do for the blackmailer's action to be unpredictable; on the contrary, it must be highly predictable that he will carry out his threat. For this, "madness"-of a different sort--is helpful: "mad" preferences or expectations, such that the blackmailer would want to carry out the threat. A love, say, of violence; or very low regard for the status quo even relative to conflict; or virtual indifference among all outcomes other than the one demanded (so that if the victim resists, the blackmailer would "just as soon" pick conflict as anything else): all of these evidences of "madness" would strengthen the blackmailer's hand, by making his threat more credible. (We suggested last time that it was preferences like these that gave Hitler such a strong bargaining position at Munich.)

In the last few lectures we have been emphasizing what might be called "blackmail" threats: threats intended to change a well-recognized status quo,

in favor of one party and at the expense of the other. But I have been arguing that the same patterns arise in all threat-behavior: for example, in bargaining, where eventually an outcome is to be expected that will make both parties better off than a status quo, but where threats on both sides are used to influence that final outcome, each party trying to make it more favorable than it otherwise would be.

If the "status quo" just before Munich should be defined to include Hitler's fixed intention to invade all of Czechoslovakia immediately (in the belief that it was unlikely that the British and French would seriously intervene), then the negotiations ending with the Munich conference appear as typical bargaining sessions, in which both parties ended up with an outcome they preferred to the status quo, and which was influenced by threats on both sides.

¶ It is easy to overlook the influence of Chamberlain's threats, because the risk they posed in Hitler's mind were not enough to make him accept the territorial status quo. (Nor could they have been; even if Hitler had found them entirely credible, he would probably have preferred the risks of combat to accepting the territorial status quo: though it seems that his generals might have revolted against him. Thus Chamberlain seems correct in feeling that he could not avoid war by "calling Hitler's bluff," or by bluffing himself; whether he should have chosen to accept war rather than the Munich agreement as Churchill would probably have done, is another story.) Still, Chamberlain was threatening war . . . if Hitler should attack. "Horrible, fantastic, incredible," he said, that the English should be digging ~~t~~^rrenches and trying on gas-masks; but they were doing these things, at the government's direction. If Hitler had attached no likelihood to these threats, they would not have influenced his decision; and he would never have sat down at a conference table

to accept the terms he did. If the threats had never been uttered, there would have been a German invasion, with or without World War II as a consequence. In connection with an offer far more favorable to Hitler than the status quo, Chamberlain's threats were influential; they gave him a bargaining position. In fact, against anyone less mad than Hitler, Chamberlain's threats would have been very impressive indeed. If Chamberlain had been confronting any of Hitler's own generals--even Goering--what would the outcome have been? That question is enough to suggest the influence on a bargaining situation of one man's preferences and character; Hitler's bargaining strength rested partly on the Luftwaffe, but not even the Commander of the Luftwaffe could have threatened its use to the effect that Hitler did. ~~(On the other hand, imagine Georges Bonnet facing Hitler instead of Chamberlain.)~~

So madness can be strength in blackmail and bargaining: what of deterrence? If deterrence is defined as the attempt to protect a status quo by threats, then the same sort of threats--promising mutual disaster--will still involve the same sort of problems. Again, unlimited and evident rationality may be a handicap to the threatener. As before, to win you don't have to be crazy, but it helps.

This is not to say that madness is essential to a deterrent policy, or that it is ever "degradable," or preferable to all other alternatives. But unless one can see how certain forms of irrationality can strengthen a bargaining position, how the reputation for calculating his risks on the basis of "normal" preferences can limit the credibility and effectiveness of a player's threats, one simply does not understand the basic problems of threat-making, whether in blackmail or deterrence. If we should conclude that certain threats are almost sure to fail of influence unless an impression of considerable madness

Since the early 1950's, NATO strategy has been based on the assurance of successive presidents of the United States that they would initiate nuclear war against the Soviet Union in the face of an "overwhelming" Soviet attack with conventional (non-nuclear) forces. And since the mid and late 1950's, such a nuclear initiative would virtually ensue a Soviet nuclear response annihilating Western Europe, if not--until the mid-1960's--the United States as well.

Of the various problems confronting this "defense," one has often been addressed specifically: how to assure that the President knows unambiguously when the moment has come to carry out his commitment: how to make the alliance command and control system---including the President--into "a truly intelligent detonator."

An early concept of one of the functions of NATO forces in Europe was that they would serve, to use a phrase attributed to Walter Lippman, as a "plateglass window." "How does a plate-glass window protect a store?" asked the exponents of this notion. A thief can get through it easily enough; but not without a loud crash, not without setting off the burglar alarm. Protecting forces--the law, or in the NATO case, American retaliatory force--need a warning signal to alert them, but more than that: for them to react swiftly and decisively, the signal must be relatively unambiguous. If the "false alarm" rate of the warning system is high--if the signal can be tripped off accidentally by a cat, or the storeowner, or a short-circuit--the duty officer in the station, the cop on the beat, may take certain precautionary measures, but they can't take irrevocable measures. But the ~~crashing~~ crashing of plate-glass storefront is more reliable evidence that a crime is taking place.

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Similarly, if the NATO nations were entirely undefended on the ground, not only would there be a chance that they could be occupied quite quietly, presenting the United States with a fait accompli and the task of dislodging them, but even if some warning were given it would tend to be ambiguous. An unopposed occupation force would not have to be large, and the intentions of a small force would not be immediately obvious. Was it merely a probing action? Had it wandered across the frontier by accident, on maneuvers? Was it the action of some subordinate unit commander, without higher authority? Or was it initiated by a satellite without Russia's approval; perhaps in hopes of getting Russia's approval after succeeding, or of committing Russia to support it? Was it merely a feint, a demonstration, to emphasize the ease of the operation, the impotence of the country penetrated? Such uncertainties wouldn't have to loom very large to keep our major retaliatory forces from undertaking any irrevocable action: such as launching missiles or European-based bombers towards Russia. By the time the nature of the action became sufficiently clear, it might seem "too late" for retaliation to be worthwhile. Or so the Russians might be encouraged to think, even if only wishfully.

Hence the advantage of having moderate forces on the frontier as a burglar alarm. Since fairly large forces and a well-planned effort would be necessary to penetrate them, the warning signal would not only be reliable but unambiguous; it would trip off retaliation if anything would. And since the Russians could see this---could

(see Lorenson and Anderson on Berlin '61)

see that they could not hope to expand without making it immediately clear that a large-scale, armed, deliberate invasion was taking place against resistance--could see that they could not invade without provoking the maximum possible risk of retaliation--they would be deterred. Thus, at any rate, the theory.

By the same theory, most proponents of disengagement in Europe urge that countries in the neutralized zone should have strong conventional forces: so that any attempt at reoccupation, being large-scale and opposed, must be unambiguous. It seems a good theory; it represents fairly the challenge that a plate-glass window presents to a thief: or that Krushchev would see in European conventional defenses. It is also very similar to a problem that Adolph Hitler faced in the late 1930's. In this lecture we will consider how he solved it.

It is fashionable just now to regard Hitler as a unique phenomenon, unlikely to be reproduced. It is true that he had peculiar advantages as a blackmailer; he was mad in ways that helped his threats enormously. But he was also shrewd enough, in a rare way, to know the power of his madness; he was self-conscious, and he took the art of coercion seriously.

We shall return in a later lecture to Hitler's special qualities as a blackmailer; today we are concerned with his techniques. But one characteristic must be mentioned: violence had, in itself, no costs for Hitler. It was, in fact, a preferred means. And risk was another of his values. Like violence, it represented to him daring, will, superiority, self-confidence. He was, then, readier to take

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high risks of war than were his opponents: or, for that matter, his own generals. "The German question," he told them, "can be solved only by way of force and this never without risk...We must place 'force with risk' at the head of our program."

But this does not mean that he was insensitive to risks, nor that he was unwilling to reduce them. Even he could not pretend to his generals, in the early years, that the risks that would be involved in open battle with England and France, or before the Anschluss, Italy or Czechoslovakia, were acceptable. His argument to his military staff, and to himself, was that the risks were, in fact, small that these nations would interfere at all; and he set out to make them smaller.

WAK For he had a theory that his generals lacked; and this theory, as they and their opponents learned, was not mad at all. He thought he knew--and he was right--what could be done with threats. He knew the tactics that could make threats "credible enough," and he guessed how credible--how little credible--they had to be to influence the particular opponents he was facing. Impatient though he was to try out his Wehrmacht, he saw the merits of testing first his private theory. "Whoever has experienced war at the front will want to refrain from all avoidable bloodshed," he had told Rauschnig in 1932. ¹"There is a broadened strategy, with intellectual weapons.. What is the object of war? To make the enemy capitulate...Why should I demoralize him by military means if I can do so better and more cheaply in other ways?"

1. Rauschnig, page 7,9.

But why demoralize, say, Austria in other ways when he could do so easily by military means? In the two cases we shall study, the Anschluss and the march to Prague after Munich, his military superiority over his victim was obviously great enough to bring victory. But there was the problem of the plate-glass window: the big friends, the upholders of international order, who quite possibly would involve themselves if there was a loud commotion. And Hitler, no less than his generals, was quite conscious of the immense costs their intervention might entail, if they should intervene.

There was, in these early years, a considerable likelihood of crushing military defeat in such a conflict: not without cost to the opponents, but decisive for the downfall of the Third Reich. Even a stalemate would mean the curtailment of Hitler's plans for expansion and perhaps a disastrous loss of authority for Hitler over his generals, who were impressed at this stage with their unreadiness and whom he had promised victory without fighting. And even victory, at the cost of heavy bloodshed, was likely to frighten his enemies into strong alliance and his own people into withdrawing their support.

Still, even if the Wehrmacht should simply charge into Austria unannounced, overwhelming the resistance by superior force, it was by no means certain that any larger power would intervene. Hitler might have been willing to take that risk; but his generals, who estimated it much larger than he did, were not; and in any case, even Hitler reckoned it crucial to reduce the risk as much as possible. Later, after he had acquired the Sudetanlands at Munich, he faced exactly the same problems with respect to the rest of Czechoslovakia as he

"will accompli"!

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had with Austria. In both cases, he wished to present his opponents with a fait accompli: to put on them the burden of penetrating his defensive positions and the onus of disturbing the new "status quo" and starting World War II, to move before they were fully committed to a specific response, to make their retaliation look to them like pure "spite" or "punishment," (provoking counter-retaliation and coming too late to serve any "positive purpose,"). For this, two conditions were necessary. The occupation must be completed very fast. And meanwhile, the reflexes of the major opponents must be slowed, their fear of "going off half-cocked" exploited, by making the nature of the move ambiguous. Ambiguity could paralyze any immediate response; and when the deed was over, Hitler's theory told him, there would be no rush on his opponents' part to dispel the obscurity that gave them an excuse for continued inaction. They would not be anxious to see in his move an offense against international order, or an eventual threat to themselves, either of which would challenge them to responses that would be costly, dangerous, and politically unpopular. When it was too late for them to counter his move successfully, Hitler saw, his enemies would thank him for making his expansion decently ambiguous; as Lewis Namier has put it: "Ambiguity is the soul of appeasement."

The equations so far read: for minimum risk of intervention, a fait accompli; for that, speed and ambiguity; and both of those demand there must be no fighting at all. The Wehrmacht could give him victory over local resistance; but that was not good enough. Direct use of military means could not give him what he needed, what his

generals demanded: an unresisted occupation. That was the limited--but crucial task for his "intellectual weapons:" a job for blackmail.

Yet coercion on this scale was no easy task. What he was demanding--what he "offered" them--was the peaceful submission of a formerly sovereign state to incorporation within Germany! At first glance, the political leaders of this state were likely to regard this as their "worst possible outcome"--and so long as they continued to believe this, they could not be coerced by threats into accepting it. Even war, they might think, might hold out some chance of avoiding this outcome, given the chance of intervention by larger powers; so why should they hand over peacefully what could not, perhaps, be taken from them by force?

Besides, if they refused, would not Hitler see the risks of intervention and be deterred from his adventure? And even if they could be persuaded that these hopes were vain, they might decide--especially if forced to a hasty decision--that it was better to be defeated honorably in a hopeless war than to surrender ignominiously without even a show of resistance.

Before his blackmail could hope to be effective, then, Hitler had to convince his victims not only that he was not to be deterred (by their resistance or by fear of intervention) but that the consequences of resistance would be worse than those of compliance.

Given the enormity of his demand--passive surrender of independence--Hitler could scarcely convince them that his "punishment" would be very much worse. Hence, in the terms of our last lecture, their "critical